

Proper 17 (A) – August 28, 2011  
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX  
Patrick Gahan  
Matthew 16:21-28  
*Get*

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She had to get me in line. But first we had to get off the runway!

Ever agreed to something that “sounded good at the time”? Well, I had one of those times just last week that literally had “a hard time getting off the ground”. Kay and I were asked to be part of a wedding celebration for two of our favorite students back in Maryland. However, to be part of the celebration, we had to take a flight down to Baltimore from Portland, Maine, where we were vacationing and where I lead worship most Sundays in August. It was a bright sunny day, so we had no reason to believe that we would have any trouble getting there. That was before we sat on the runway for two hours...the first time. Because of new federal regulations, they had to take us back to the gate after two-hours of sitting in a fully-loaded aircraft, stuffed with crying infants, angry people, and madly repeating music on hand-held video games.

So they rushed us off the aircraft and just as quickly demanded we race back again and re-board. The carrot the gate personnel used to corral us was that we were going to take off at any minute. That was a lie we soon learned once we taxied out onto the middle of the main runway and watched our big Boeing jet ordered off the side of the tarmac. The airline merely needed to get us out of the gate area so that an incoming flight of much happier people could deplane.

Again, we sat on the side of the runway for over two hours. Alas, it was a prophecy that things would only get worse. On our return Saturday evening, our flight back to Portland, the last flight into Maine that night I must add, was cancelled. We barely caught a flight up to Boston, and arrived back at our summer rectory at 1 AM. I had to be at the church in six hours' time.

While still in Maryland and I was suffering with a hangover from all that craziness and stress, I angrily lamented to Kay, “Why the heck did I agree to this wedding? I'm supposed to be on vacation! How did I let myself get into this mess?” Kay listened to my rant and then quietly answered, “Pat, you don't know to whom God sent you on this trip.” That one sentence was all it took to make my heart sink to my knees and get me back in line.

As a matter of fact, it only took one sentence to get Peter back in line, too...albeit a much harsher line than Kay issued to me. "Get behind me, Satan," was the one-liner Jesus extended to Pete.

How in the world did Pete go so fast from hero to goat in Jesus' estimation? I mean, just days before Peter garners the nickname "Rock" from Jesus, and the Lord goes so far as to say on the "rock" solid faith of Peter's confession "Christ will build his Church" **(Matthew 16:17-18)**. Now Peter gets a new nickname – "Satan." Whew! We'd better listen again to what Jesus said that got Peter in such hot water: "I must go to Jerusalem," Jesus declares, "and there undergo suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" **(Matthew 16:21)**.

To Peter's credit, he does show some restraint upon hearing this biting message. He quietly takes Jesus aside and says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you" **(Matthew 16:22)**. At that, Jesus takes off the gloves and let's Peter have it right in front of the other eleven. The "Rock" suddenly becomes an object lesson none of them will soon forget – if ever: "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus storms, "You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" **(Matthew 16:23)**.

I hear an echo of Kay's voice in all this: "Pat, You are only thinking of your personal discomfort, your time, and supposed inconvenience. You don't know what God is up to in sending you on this trek to Maryland. " No matter who states it, the Lord, our spouse, a friend, a member of the church, or a total stranger, it comes as a bit of a shock that our comfort, our timetable, and our convenience are not uppermost on God's list. But when we do fall into such thinking, we are not only being self-consumed, but we are trying to domesticate God at the same time.

If we try to look at this from the God-ward side of things, we are confronted with the truth about Jesus' work. "I must go to Jerusalem," Jesus says. He is not ordained by the Father to be primarily a teacher or a healer or even a political bur underneath Herod's and Pilate's saddle. No, Jesus' primary appointment is to be kept in Jerusalem. Jesus has a pressing appointment with death, a death that will show that God's dominion will be experienced in submission – and not power; in obedience – and not self-advancement; and in sacrifice – not personal comfort. In other words, Jesus' primary work is contrary to anything the religious or secular authorities could have ever conjured up! Jesus is the embodiment of God's dominion.

In light of that revelation, should we then be surprised that our primary work will be sacrificial as well? Jesus says so clearly, "For those who wish to save their life will loose

it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (**Matthew 16:23**). Unless we "lose our lives" in something much bigger than ourselves – God's new dominion – we will never "find our lives." I hear Christians claim most every day that they believe that God has a unique, one-of-a-kind purpose for them. Yet we will never find that purpose unless we take Jesus' path of sacrifice – never! It is the only path to get a life.

To be honest, I've had a very hard time learning this lesson, which should be obvious to you by my wife's recent admonition to me. Just in case you are having a hard time with it too, let me offer us some practical things I am learning: **One** – God does not care about our timetable. He has his own, and his purpose will be worked out through us in "his own good time" – maddening flight delays included. God used every moment in Jesus' life from Bethlehem to Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee to his last trek to Jerusalem just to arrive at the perfect time at Calvary. **Two** – God does not intend for things to get easier, but harder. After all, Jesus ends his work with an uphill climb up to Calvary. No Christian can walk a path that detours around to the Cross. **Three** – God does not demand results from us. That's his department. He asks us only to be faithful. Our Lord marched faithfully to death at Calvary, but the results were that God raised him from the dead. Here I recall the lyrical, yet piercing words of Saint Paul:

*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.  
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in  
the form of God did not count equality with God something to be exploited, but  
emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to  
the point of death—even death on a cross. **Philippians 2:4-8***

Again, that is our own ultimate journey. The sacrificial life ends in a life so much more alive, so much fuller than we could have ever, ever imagined.

Thus, it goes without saying that we can't tell what God is up to. On that same trip when Kay and I were walking up a verdant hill in Maryland and I had taken a breath from my ranting – I finally confessed to Kay, "I know that the scripture says that God intends "to give us the desires of our heart" (**Psalms 37:4**). Without fanfare, Kay looked at me and replied, "God has given you the desires of your heart, God gave you me." Sometimes it takes me a while to get it